

7. A Kudzu Pilgrimage—Liberal Congregationalism in the Southeast

In the overall spectrum of American Christianity, Congregationalism has, for better or worse, occupied a liberal place on the theological and cultural registers. This was especially the case from the mid-19th century onward, as, gradually but surely, churches and people began to shake loose the rigidities of their Puritan-Calvinist, deterministic and pessimistic pasts. Emphasizing ethics and love over sin and fear, the “New Divinity” of the immediate antebellum period in New England made its mark in that region and places wherever New Englanders settled along the northern bounds of the U.S. The South, where an early attempt to re-create the orderly, conscientious culture of Puritanism dissipated into a slave-dependent economy and reactionary ideas about life and faith, would prove a very difficult place to plant a non-authoritarian variant of Christianity, given that the “Lost Cause” in the wake of the War Between the States would convince most people that theirs was a sacred society and that all others were defective at best and pagan at worst.

But the lack of cultural compatibility did not deter a group of Northern emigres to Atlanta and several home mission board representatives from founding what is today known as Central Congregational Church in 1882. Then, as the congregation’s centennial history book, *A Southern Pilgrimage*, noted,

... Atlanta was already establishing itself as a strategic transportation and commercial center. The railroads that had given life to Atlanta before the Civil War took on even greater importance when, with the addition of new lines, Atlanta became a connecting point between east-west and north-south routes. The city’s strategic location on major transportation arteries helped make it a regional center of wholesale trade, of branch offices of national firms doing business in the Southeast, and of the Southeast’s banking and insurance industries. (The national representatives) hoped that Atlanta would also become the regional headquarters of Congregationalism ...

Transportation and commerce made Atlanta a magnet for people, and by 1882 they were flocking in from all over; southern whites, primarily from the rural areas of North Georgia; former slaves, mainly from the plantations and towns of Middle Georgia; and northerners, from as far away as Maine ... Atlantans of northern birth were few, comprising only 3.5 percent of the population in 1880. But their influence far outstripped their number. They made up a disproportionate share of the city’s commercial elite. As such, they helped set the tone of business activity, which

caused visitors and the city's premier newspaperman to label Atlanta "Yankee City" and the "Chicago of the South."

Here, then is the beginning of a contradiction, for Atlanta and also for Central Congregational Church: this was a city linked by steel mill, telegraph wire, and Yankee capital to the Northeast, but also a city bound to the cultures, black and white, of the Old South.¹

Working in such a paradoxical place, Central Church, which operated under several different monikers until settling on its present name around the turn of the century, provided a taste of the familiar to homesick Northerners, with a sober, restrained, yet gentle and joyful style of worship and mission. There were no protracted revivals or passionate denunciations of outsiders; orientation was definitely toward the cultivation of character and hospitality. While undergoing numerous changes, including a temporary division in the early 20th century, Central Church has remained in that mode for well nigh its entire history. The Social Gospel, foreign to the spiritual sensibilities of most Southern churches, was not at all anathema to Central's members. Withstanding a large "turnstile" membership and moves to a busy Midtown intersection and later to suburban DeKalb County near the extremely busy Interstate 85, the church has generally prospered over time and continues its tradition of service today through ministries to migrant workers in southern Georgia (as part of an Emory University program); local schoolchildren; LGBTQI persons; and even the environment, which is an inescapable part of Central's atmosphere given its location in the midst of several acres of undeveloped forest. For most of the UCC's existence, Central Church has given the largest amount of any congregation in the Conference (and before then, the old Southeast Convention of Congregational Christian Churches) to basic support of OCWM during a single calendar year, and has often led the way in giving to the several annual offerings also.

Some 75 miles to the northeast in a small Georgia village that was home to what would in future years become Piedmont University, an Ohio-born Congregationalist minister formed a congregation at a meeting in the Women's Christian Temperance Union hall.² This group, known as the Union Congregational Church, was a reform-minded, theologically open body in the mold of Northern Congregationalism. Piedmont College (as it was then called, now University) had a similar aim, to make into red-blooded Americans boys from the isolated hills of northern Georgia, to free them especially from the hold of liquor and sexual promiscuity. Since the church was never large, it sought a novel way to survive by forming a federation with the local Methodist church in 1947, uniting two organizations and two sets of auxiliaries under one pastor and one program (i.e., Sunday School and worship), at one location.

Today's Methodist-Congregational Federated Church in Demorest, Georgia continues this tradition of inclusion and social reform, albeit of a milder variety than some of its sister churches in the Southeast Conference. Because of the location, the church has mostly been served by Methodist (presently, the UMC) clergy since the federation's founding and presently relates to that body, the UCC, and, since the 1990s, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, with which Piedmont is also affiliated.

By the time of World War I, the conflict between Biblical inerrancy and Christian freedom was sharpening, dividing many traditional churches into two. In the case of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a combination of moral reform and a local Methodist congregation's hypocrisy in allowing a medicinal alcohol manufacturer to remain a member in good standing despite his profession spurred on that church's founding in 1914.³ For "freedom of the pulpit" was a rallying cry that fell on deaf Tennessee Methodist ears, and Charles Haven Myers (1880-1963) refused to become a clergy victim, becoming instead Pilgrim's first pastor. In later years, the church's best-known pastor was an Englishman by the name of Arnold Slater, who served between 1944 and 1971. His firm yet gentle pulpit delivery and his strong social consciousness made Pilgrim into a leader among Congregational Christian churches in the Southeast and liberally-inclined churches in the larger Chattanooga area. First located in Downtown, the congregation moved to the foot of Missionary Ridge (itself named after the Cherokee missions conducted in part by Congregationalists in the early 19th century) in the 1950s, where it remains today. In addition to being a historically generous contributor to OCWM, Pilgrim has produced leaders for the Alabama-Tennessee Association and the Southeast Conference, names too numerous to point out here. Like many churches of its type, its people are attempting to devise ministries to meet the spiritual and social needs of the Tennessee Valley while dealing with a membership significantly reduced from the mid-20th century and shorter pastorate tenures than in previous generations.

Birmingham, Alabama, the steel-making capital of the South for much of its history, also experienced an influx of Northern-born businessmen and managers as Atlanta did. In 1903, some of them established today's Pilgrim Church (UCC), known as Pilgrim Congregational Church until the late 2000s. One early pastor, the Rev. George Eaves (1858-1926), took a strong interest in the then-current epidemic of tuberculosis and helped found a local association to combat it, a forerunner of today's American Lung Association.⁴ The early Pilgrim took a number of twists and turns, eventually gaining a large number of former members of First Presbyterian Church who were protesting their denomination's hardline Southern Calvinism. By the 1940s, the church had a downtown edifice and some 500 members on the rolls.

But structural issues with that building forced another move in 1959 to the lush suburb of Mountain Brook, into an A-frame construction so noteworthy that it was featured in several magazine articles and advertisements and was nicknamed the “Blue Roof Church” due to the hue of the coating sprayed on the metallic cover. In the 1960s, the church experienced division over the Civil Rights movement, but survived with a greater appreciation for the new UCC’s social action concerns. After a quarter century of theologically moderate pastorates and attempts to position itself as a socially prominent church, Pilgrim moved into a more progressive direction under the Rev. Richard Sales in the 1990s, and became the first Alabama UCC congregation to adopt the “Open and Affirming” platform in 2001. The aging of the 1950s structure caused the church to sell the property to developers and return to the city in the 2007-08 time frame, first taking up residence in the chapel of Southside Baptist Church before renovating a former car dealership showroom floor in the Lakeview neighborhood, which it has shared with a sister UCC congregation, Covenant Community Church, since 2020. Today, although having a small membership, it is in the forefront of local and statewide activism for greater rights for all and an inclusive way of “being church.”

The geographically farthest liberal Congregational-heritage church in the Southeast Conference may well have done the most for the greater UCC over time, as a springboard for countless ordained ministers. Brookmeade Congregational Church in Nashville was born from the ruins of an earlier congregation, which operated as Collegieside Congregational Church from 1928 to 1953. Some remnant members of that group reorganized as the Pilgrim Fellowship, meeting on the Vanderbilt University campus. Since the 1929 relocation of the Congregational-related Atlanta Theological Seminary to the Vanderbilt School of Religion (now Divinity School), Collegieside/Brookmeade has had a peculiar vocation as a “teaching parish” for seminarians to hone their preaching, pastoral care, and teaching skills before being ordained to the church at large. Taking its name from the suburban subdivision where it eventually settled, Brookmeade was very active in Nashville’s dynamic but peaceful Civil Rights struggles in the 1960s, and likewise, three decades later, was among the pioneers of the “Open and Affirming” movement, becoming the first church in the entire Southeast Conference to adopt the platform, all the way back in 1994. In between those two eras, the congregation witnessed the heartbreak of losing its sanctuary to a fire in 1973 but also the joy of constructing a new one in 1981. The longest-tenured pastor in its history, Daniel Rosemergy, was second to none as a staunch activist for progressive causes in Middle Tennessee, and many Brookmeade members also have similar reputations in the community at large.⁵ In the early 2020s, after years of struggling with issues related to the metropolitan area’s explosive population increase and the resulting tenuous status, in terms of economic feasibility

and identity alike, of small-membership congregations in such an atmosphere (and secondarily with the area's large demographic of younger, secular adults largely uninterested in Christianity of any kind), Brookmeade made the first steps toward revitalization by selling some of its land and hiring a full-time pastor from the proceeds, despite the membership number being well below 100.

The last church to take a Congregational-like shape was founded right on the eve of the UCC merger. In late 1956, some members of Knoxville, Tennessee's Second Presbyterian Church sought to forestall their congregation's relocation from Downtown to a plot west of the University of Tennessee (UT) campus. Failing to convince either congregational or presbytery leaders, they worked out an agreement whereby they could continue to worship in their beloved Gothic building—albeit in another denomination. Due to a number of factors, namely the fact that some members had previously belonged to them, the Congregational Christian Churches were chosen.⁶ With a “ready-made” congregation, the First Congregational Church developed quickly into a leader of liberal theology and social concern for a decidedly placid, conservative center of Appalachia, mainly known in the region as the home of UT. However, the aging building eventually became a crippling burden due to maintenance, and the church, ironically enough, wound up leaving in 1968 for greener pastures in western Knoxville, well to the west of Second Presbyterian's location. First setting up in an old stone house on a new piece of property, the church built a modern, all-in-one structure in 1972. Signaling that it was more or less a restart, the church took the name “Church of the Savior” (known as “COS” for short) in 1969 at the instigation of new pastor Donald Flick. Flick, and later John Lackey and current pastor John Bluth Gill, supervised a re-orientation toward service to the community, whether in traditional charity forms or advocacy for social justice, of which COS is second to none perhaps in all of East Tennessee. So strong have the justice commitments been that in 1984, rather than give into hysteria over AIDS by parents, the church decided to discontinue its child care center rather than expel the new fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Church of Knoxville from its premises, a highly unusual move at the time.⁷ This special brand of inclusion and witness has attracted strong congregational growth in recent years, now with over 300 people on the rolls, serving as a magnet of sorts for progressive-minded Christians from throughout East Tennessee.

All of the six churches mentioned here are geographically isolated from one another, usually by anywhere from 100 to 150 miles, so physical proximity played no role in their development. Instead, they typically draw their leadership from many backgrounds, whose common denominator is a desire for a better world and a non-legalistic understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and religion in general. Most recently-

established congregations among mainly Whites in the UCC have looked to that model to follow in their common life, to be sure. But in a more triumphant vein, the six churches of the Liberal Congregational tradition in the Southeast Conference prove that, with strong leadership, vision, and determination, a pilgrimage can be made through anything—even the kudzu that covers the Southern ground.

NOTES

1. Harold L. Johnson et al., *A Southern Pilgrimage: Central Congregational Church of Atlanta, Georgia, 1882-1982*, ed. Robert C. McMath, Jr., 2-3.
2. Sarah Gillespie Fenner, *History of the Methodist-Congregational Federated Church of Demorest* (Demorest, GA: 1989), 1.
3. Kay Baker Gaston, *A History of Pilgrim Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Chattanooga, Tennessee on the Occasion of Its Seventy-fifth Anniversary, 1914-1989*, 3.
4. Frances T. Feazel, *A History of the Pilgrim Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, 1903-2003* (Birmingham, 2003), 5.
5. *A Collection for Celebration 2003: The Past, Present, and Future* (Nashville: Brookmeade Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ, 2003).
6. Charles H. Faulkner, John R. Lackey, and John Bluth Gill, *A Light Set on a Hill: The 50 Year Anniversary of the Church of the Savior* (Knoxville, 2007), 2.
7. *Ibid.*, 17, 30.